

Bubble City: Chapter 2

Downtown San Francisco is a world of carefully-gridded streets and looming skyscrapers, but hidden behind a gas station on Third is a place that almost looks like another world. The sun shines brightly upon a park with green grass and tall shady trees and vibrant swings with children. The park is an oval and the perimeter is lined with small, pastel-colored buildings. Here and there are a smattering of small cafes and restaurants. And the other buildings are filled with startups. Twitter here. Adaptive Path there. Even Yahoo, when it wanted to encourage its employees to be more startup-y, opened up an office in the neighborhood. Sit on the grass and chances are you'll sit near a friend from another company or bump into them in line at a cafe. The place crawls with companies and back on the street, surveying the scene with a distant but watchful eye, lie the journalists, whose publications cover with awe the rumblings of those below. It was here that Newsflip made its home.

Jason entered the building expecting to be greeted warmly by the relaxed startup world. Instead, the scene he entered was utter chaos. "Get me CNN!" shouted a man at the front of the room, apparently to no one in particular. Others buzzed at their desks, shouting to one another, shouting at their phones, shouting at their computers, shouting at their coffee mugs. One guy just seemed to keep spinning around in his chair for no reason in particular.

Jason stood around surveying the scene for a moment until a man standing up motioned for him to come over. "What do you mean we can't get CNN?" he shouted into his phone. "This is America." He placed his hand over the phone and looked down. "You must be Jason," he said. "Uh, yes, sir. Are you—" "Goddamn it, I don't care if you have to *buy* it, I want a 5 minute segment on Wolf Blitzer." He covered the phone again. "It's great to have you on the team, son." Jason thought this was a bit fast to be adopted as a son, but didn't feel like he could press the point.

"Look I don't have time for this shit," he suddenly barked. "Just get me on CNN." He slammed the phone down, sat down on the side of the desk, and adopted an avuncular tone. "Let me tell you a little story," he said. "Uh, OK," Jason said, but the man talked right over him.

"One day, not long after I graduated college, I was waiting at a bus stop. And sitting there on the seat beside me was a magazine, opened to an article about a newspaper. So I read the article and it just took my breath away. Took my breath away. And I said to myself, 'Self, one day you're going to be running a newspaper like that.' Well, it took me twenty years to do it, but here I am. Sure, technically we don't use paper, but we print news all the same, right? Anyway, isn't that amazing?"

Jason just smiled and nodded.

"Of course, I didn't get there just by sitting back and watching. No, sir. I got there by joining someone else's startup, seeing how it was done, and then using what I'd learned to turn around and start a new company to destroy their main product. Heh, heh. Well, I guess what I'm saying is that I better keep an eye out on you. Better keep an eye out on you."

Jason looked a bit worried. And puzzled.

"Anyway, as you can see things are a bit crazy around here." He waved his arm past the still-chaotic room. "So I better get back to work. But I'm sure you'll settle in fine — and if there's any trouble you just let me know. Good luck!" he added and then picked up the phone again and started screaming without even dialing.

Looking for his desk, Jason wandered around the office for a bit, past the spinning, screaming, slacking employees, until he found an unused desk over in a corner. There was a memo on it, addressed to him, reminding him of the company's copyright and confidentiality commitments that he'd signed, which he promptly tossed in the trash.

He sat down and began inventorying the other contents of the desk: a flat screen monitor, a dual-processor tower, an IP phone, a keyboard, a mo—. He noticed a tugging at his leg and looked down. He sprang back. There was a girl beneath his desk. "Sssssssh!" she whispered and motioned for him to come towards her. Slowly and awkwardly, he crouched down and crawled towards the girl. She pulled him under the desk with her and extended her hand.

"Hi, I'm Sarah," she said. He shook it. "Hi, I'm, uh, Jason." "Hey, Jason! Welcome aboard the team." "So, why are we down here?" "Because it's crazy up there, silly. Why get involved in all that screaming mess when we can just slip off in the storm and hang out by ourselves?" "I guess. What's all the fuss about, though?" "Oh, just some tech pissing contest. Some blowhard with a webcam doesn't like some tech decision some intern made and now everybody's going DEFCON 5." "Actually, DEFCON 5 is the lowest level of military activation. I think you probably mean DEFCON 3." She just looked at him. He looked back and realized he should probably shut up.

"So Sarah, what do you do here?" he ventured. "I'm in charge of training newbies, silly," she said, and ruffled his hair. "Catch me if you can!" she added, before darting out from under the desk and running across the office. Jason followed in pursuit.

She ran to the middle of the roll of desks, then crouched down and rolled under one of them to the next row. Jason kept running to the end of the row to try to head her off at the pass, doing his best to dodge the spinning chairs and thrown balls that were filling the office. Sarah made a bee-line for the door, stopping only to grab the skateboard lying next to it, which she used to skitter down the stairwell. Jason hopped the whole flight after her.

Reaching the bottom, she sped out the door just as an overweight man was opening it to enter. He jumped out of the way and screwed up his face in anger. "Don't you know who I am?" he shouted down the street at her. "Nope," replied Jason, running out the door after her.

On the street, she skateboarded around baby strollers, old people, and dazed-looking hipsters like a pro, while Jason was jogging as fast as he could just to keep up. She jumped lights right before traffic, took bizarre shortcuts and side-streets, and occasionally turned back to laugh at him. After a couple blocks of this she jumped up onto a railing and headed into a park. The next thing Jason knew she was halfway up a tree in the middle of a park surrounded by shopping malls and people. Jason hadn't come this far just to give up at a tree, so he scurried up afterwards, finding himself balanced precariously on a branch. Once again he found himself in a secluded spot surrounded by people, sitting alone, facing Sarah.

"Not bad, kid," she said.

Wayne ambled in and pressed the button for the elevator. Once he got to the office Trent spotted him at the door and, screaming a few last words into his phone before slamming it down, headed over and led Wayne into a conference room. The office got silent as he walked by. "Fans!," he thought.

Trent shut the door behind him. "Wayne, Wayne, Wayne, so good to see you!" "Good to see you too, Trent! What's it been? A couple years?" "Yeah, must have been that ETech two years ago. The one with that Bezos keynote." Wayne laughed. "How could I forget?"

"Anyway, as I'm sure you know I invited you here because we were all very hurt by your comments on your show yesterday." "Oh, that silly thing? Well I certainly hope no one was too offended. I was just sharing some concerns I had with the changes you were making. That's all." "If you had concerns you should have just taken them to us. My door is always open to you. You know that."

Wayne looked at him. "Actually, I don't. Let's be frank here. If I try to get an appointment with any startup in this city they push me off on the calendar and jerk me around until three months have gone by and they've closed their B round of funding and the VCs have hired a professional public relations team to professionally sit and ignore comments from people like me. But if I talk about it on my show I get ushered into your conference room the next morning. So let's not play dumb here. You know as well as I how this game works."

"Wayne, Wayne, Wayne," trent said shaking his head. "What do you want? Do you want us to use this NNA thing? Done! You got it. It doesn't make any difference to me. I don't even know what the hell the thing does. Look, what do you need from us? Is that all?"

"Thanks, Trent. You're a sweetheart. That'd be great." "Well I'm glad we could settle this so easily. You know, Wayne, if you ever need anything else, just give me a ring. My door is always open. Hell, I don't even have a door! Heh, heh." "Of course, Trent. Thanks so much." "Here, let me see you out."

Trent ushered Wayne to the door. "Oh, there is one more thing," Wayne added. "Sure, what is it?" Trent asked. "Well, I've just been noticing in my referer logs that traffic from Newsflip has been dropping sharply lately." "Really? I had no idea," Trent replied. "Now I'm not asking for any special treatment here." "Mo, goodness no, of course not." "But if you guys could just look into the anomaly. Try to figure out what could be going haywire. That would be great." "Oh, of course Wayne. I'll put my top guy on it." "Thanks so much, Trent. Let's keep in touch." "Let's."

All day, people came back and forth through Yerba Buena Park, while Jason and Sarah hung from the branches above their heads, talking. Indeed, hours passed before Jason even thought to consult his watch. Jason was used to seeing other people as a necessary evil: curiosity and courtesy were behaviors he had worked hard to learn to imitate so that others didn't find him too strange, but he did his best to make sure other people took no more than a couple hours of his time.

Sarah was different. She was the only person he'd ever talked to who made him feel completely relaxed in his own skin. He didn't have to worry about being someone else or trying to be interesting or checking the time. They just talked and talked and laughed and laughed.

Sarah looked up at the sun overhead where it hung suspended above the park. "Hey, let's go grab some lunch she said," and swung down, branch to branch, before leaping to the ground. Jason followed, smiling.

Wayne got back in front of the camera and pressed the button.

"Alright, for today's Internet Hero segment, where I keep an eye out for the other people who are keeping an eye out for you. I'd like to give a big shout-out to one of my favorite Internet startups, Newsflip. I had a great conversation today with Newsflip's CEO, Trent Rayburn, and he told me a bit about Newsflip's philosophy and strategy and I have to say, I'm 100% on board."

"There are a lot of companies out there that just don't understand users. They think you, the people who make their companies run, are just people to be spat on and squeezed for cash. Not at Newsflip. There's a company that puts users first. And I salute them for it. So that's today's Internet Hero: Newsflip."

Tomorrow: [Chapter Three](#)

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